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ABSTRACT

The Supreme Court's 1954 Brown decision, which addressed itself to the question of race, was as applicable to the national media as to the nation's public schools. In its watchdog role, the media has often preached to government and businesses, without applying the same standards to itself. The media, an industry governed and ruled by white males who wield awesome amounts of power, has great impact on people's lives, and has had a major influence on institutional racism. Despite its power and influence, the media refuses to be held accountable for its own racism. The "liberal press" would have people believe that racism is not reflected in the exclusion of non-whites from its corporate boards, from ownership, and from the ranks of editorial decision makers. Today, 60 percent of the daily newspapers still do not employ a single minority journalist. When minorities are not allowed in newsrooms, news stories are often incomplete, poorly researched, and largely inaccurate. The source of the media's power, which allows it to continue its hyprocritical practices unchecked, is the reader and viewer. The Black press has attempted to reach the Black audience, but most of the established Black publications are now experiencing declines. If the media is to intelligently interpret our constantly changing society, it must continue its "catch up" affirmative action programs by active recruiting and training of minority journalists. The media must improve its coverage of black concerns and newsmakers, and not continue to ignore or control public opinions toward the actions of major black leaders like Andrew Young and Jesse Jackson. (KH)

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DESEGREGATION/INTEGRATION AND THE MEDIA: FALLOUT FROM THE BROWN DECISION

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It is good to be back in West Virginia. I can recall my initial visit to this great state. That was in September of 1942 when I arrived as a freshman at this land grant institution, which at the time was strictly for Negro students.

Returning here today, I see that the complexion has changed considerably. I still remember my first train ride here from Philadelphia and how I got off the Pennsy in Washington to change to the segregated car section of the Chesapeake and Ohio before continuing on to Charleston.

My arrival at the Charleston Railroad Station occasioned an unusual reunion for me with a fellow freshman who, along with a large delegation of east coast students, arrived about the same time. You can imagine the confusion--there we were all hustling to get our trunks and arrange for them to be sent to Institute. Finally, I got a cab with five other students. One of them turned out to be Harold Benton, who, as he looked around at the hundreds of whooping and hollering Black students, complained that he obviously was going to the wrong campus. You see, Harold, with his blue eyes and other delicate features, could have passed for white. And wouldn't you know? Upon meeting and introducing ourselves in the cab, we discovered that we were in the same second grade in a North Philly elementary school, and had lived across the street from each other.

And, by the way, West Virginia State College WAS integrated back in 1942. In fact, you might say it was color-blind as well. The single white student amongst the 2000 member student body happened to be blind as well as white.

First, I'd like to say that I am flattered at being given such a great opportunity to participate in so significant a lecture series and to be asked to discuss

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and expound on the historical anniversary topic:

Brown v. The Board of Education, Topeka:

"An Assessment 30 Years Later"

In the past three decades, the measurement of social change has taken in a lot of events. Contrary to my jokes about my mischievous and illustrious stay on this campus, the late president-emeritus, John W. Davis--who was most anxious to see me leave--nevertheless was highly revered and respected by me for his inspiring leadership. He certainly was one of America's foremost educators. And, due in large part to his character, the hundreds of students that passed through this institution, mostly all Blacks at the time, left here cultivated and equipped to deal with any of society's challenges.

On John W.'s campus, back in the olden days, it was mandatory to attend chapel three times a week. Miss three times, and you could be in some serious trouble. Now, I didn't miss too many, simply because I happened to have been assigned alphabetically to sit between two foxes. Hardly a week passed when prexy didn't have some nationally distinguished speaker here. Many of the various departments also brought prominent personalities here to Kanawha County. Today, it is most gratifying to see that President Thomas Cole is continuing this tradition of progress that focuses on society and its challenging international needs.

Now, I'm still puzzled as to why Dr. Cole included me in this particular series. All the other lecturers are top drawer folks--distinguished psychologists, sociologists, legal scholars and educators. I'm certainly not in their league. I know it's President Cole's attempt at staging a balanced program (smile)--and we are advocating equality (smile). So, you're stuck with me.

Whatever the questionable judgment in inviting me, I can offer this: I have been working for newspapers almost exclusively since leaving here in 1946. And just so the record will be complete, I even served as a sportswriter for WVSC during

my junior and senior years. For the past 20 years, I've been associated with one of America's top newspapers, The Boston Globe. With that background, I'll concentrate on and address my comments to the role that newspapering has played since the Brown Decision was handed down.

I recently ran across a report by Kenneth B. Clark and John Hope Franklin entitled, "A Policy Framework for Racial Justice." In the foreward the authors said that even in the early 1940's, W. E. B. DuBois was saying that the most difficult stage in the struggle for racial justice in America would be when it became clear that fundamental inequities persisted in spite of litigation, legislation and direct confrontation. The success or failure of the civil rights struggle, he said, would ultimately be determined by the ability of highly trained groups of Black scholars to use their disciplined intelligence as effective weapons in the battle for social justice.

Although John W. Davis, believing that I was involved with an underground newspaper, wanted to kick me out of school and had state troopers searching my dormitory room a week before graduation, I never failed to maintain the greatest respect for him. This attitude brought about our mutual admiration for each other because John W. and W. E. B. DuBois were on the same wavelength for championing social justice.

W. E. B. DuBois' prescience may be seen in the light of the profound inequities that persist despite the progress generated by the Brown Decision in 1954; despite the civil rights laws of 1964 and 1965; despite the non-violent civil disobedience movement directed by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr; and despite the sporadic urban riots of the late 1960's. We are indeed at the most difficult stage in the quest for racial justice.

When the United States Supreme Court handed down its now historic decision in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, newspapers across the nation ran

banner headlines. Many ran editorials predicting that America, because of her history and character, would use this decision as a springboard for eradicating de jure segregation and discrimination. Banning segregation in the public schools of the South, including West Virginia, the District of Columbia and 16 other states, was acclaimed as "momentous" and a "milestone" in American history.

Television was still in its media infancy at the time. But newspapers--both large and small--along with national magazines, reported this important event without acknowledging that they, too, had a role to play as the decision impacted their industry as well.

Newspapers pride themselves on being seen as the "honest broker" in dealings between the public and government. They revel in being labelled "The Fourth Estate." These points are illustrated by the mighty and powerful New York Times with its proud slogan, "All the news that's fit to print," and your own local Charleston Daily Mail's slogan, "Without or With, Offense to Friends or Foes, I Sketch Your World Exactly as it Goes." The printed press shapes society's attitudes, then and now, much more so than does the nightly national news on television.

Immediately after the Brown Decision, legal experts were quoted in news stories as saying they believed it would be years before the Supreme Court followed through and forced states to comply with its decision outlawing segregation in the nation's public schools. What a prophecy! In the 1970's and 1980's, large urban cities, in the North, Chicago, Detroit, Boston and out west, Los Angeles, showed their true color with massive resistance campaigns when their turn came to integrate.

Now you may well ask what the relationship is between the press and all this fuss about the Brown Decision. This major civil rights breakthrough was not only significant for schools in the South, but a reflection on the whole agenda of institutional racism that was national in scope, including government, religion, business, sports and the so-called "Fourth Estate."

A lot of American citizens still regard the press as the watchdog that keeps government officials from committing too much overt hanky-panky. As a result, the press is subject to a lot of attacks from business, government, community activists and others, concerning standards of accuracy, integiity and fair play. For our part, we, the media, are always espousing our First Amendment rights as free press. We also are inclined to preach about accountability, credibility and respectability, often without applying to ourselves the same standards that we demand from those in high places.

The Brown decision, which addressed itself to the question of race, was as applicable to the media as to the nation's public schools. After all, the media industry, governed and ruled almost exclusively by white males who wield awesome amounts of power, has great impact on our lives. Thus, the industry also is a major influence upon institutional racism in America.

William Davis Taylor, former publisher of The Boston Globe and chairman, American Newspaper Publishers' Association, states at the latter organization's annual convention in 1974: "The newspaper business may not have done the best possible job in America, but it has done better than many other institutions that have tried from time to time. Some say we are untouched by the forces around us; that our decisions are sterile and unresponsive."

Davis continued: "From another direction, it is said that we are too involved; that we make news, not report it. More than anything, it's a responsibility to those we try to serve. That responsibility flows directly from the First Amendment and the rights that amendment gives--not to the press, but to the people.

In 1968, the media was called to account when the Kerner Commission made its report to President Lyndon B. Johnson and the nation. The Commission said that through insensitive reporting, the media was the major influence in inflaming race riots. This was sharp criticism of the powerful "Fourth Estate," with all this

special protection under the First Amendment to the U. S. Constitution. The media claims that the free press clause gives it special rights and privileges that are not afforded to other businesses.

And for those of you who may not know, the media industry is, first and foremost, a business. And business is about earning profits. The impact on society and business brings under close scrutiny the media's refusal, despite its power and influence, to be held accountable. And instead of its arrogance about its sometimes arbitrary and capricious practices that result in inaccuracy, carelessness and bias, the media must take to heart complaints from business and the community and make visible, persistent and consistent efforts to be fair. For the media's most precious commodity is its credibility.

You see, the First Amendment which protects freedom of expression from abridgement by any law, also guarantees to the people, through their press, a constitutional right that places on newspaper people a particular responsibility.

The American press was made free not just to inform or just to serve as a forum for debate, but also to bring an independent, close scrutiny to bear on the forces in society that affect the people. This includes the conduct of official power at all levels of government. And although we acknowledge the media's shortcomings, it is still important that we support and understand the importance of the media's First Amendment rights. Without the First Amendment, both the media and all of us in this hall, who today are celebrating a major civil rights victory, are losers with press.

A syndicated Black columnist, Carl T. Rowan, recently replied to the question, "Who elected the press to a watchdog role? Those nation-founders who were fleeing tyranny and religious persecution, so unwanting of another king that they sought ways to prevent imperiousness and dangerous accretions of power among those elected to do a new nation's business," he wrote.

He added, "It was not theory, but experience, that told our forefathers that while power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely. So they went to great lengths to ensure that this new society, America, would have checks and balances of the legislature, the courts, and yes, the press to guarantee that no new executive despot would arise to say arrogantly: 'I am the King.'"

"The need for a free press to help protect the larger freedom of all the people has not changed from the days of Jefferson, Thomas Paine and others who knew the terrible burdens that come when those granted power are unwatched, unchecked and thus unafraid to try to transform 'mandate' into despotism," said Rowan.

On the other hand, the so-called "liberal press" would have us believe that institutional racism is not reflected in the exclusion of non-whites from their corporate boards, from ownership, and from their ranks of editorial decision-makers. While criticizing other businesses, the liberal press apparently feels it is enough if they are just responsible for reporting the news through their "white eyes." "Do as I say--not as I do" seems to be standard operating procedure.

It was interesting to recognize that conservative forces were quick to point out to liberals that they were not applying to themselves the same measures for ending institutional racism that they were asking from others. By not allowing minorities in newsrooms, their case was perceived by many as outright hypocrisy. News stories are often incomplete, poorly researched and printed with lots of inaccuracies.

Where does the media get so much power that it can continue its hypocritical practices apparently unchecked? It comes primarily from your support--the support of readers and viewers. The newspapers with the largest circulations can demand the highest advertising rates. The television station or network with the largest viewing audience also gets the highest advertising rates.

Now for the good health of a newspaper to continue, from whom do the health remedies come? In my part of the country, they come from Sears and Roebuck, Jordan Marsh, Filene's, Lechmere Sales, Stop and Shop Supermarkets, airlines and cigarette manufacturer . These are the major advertisers who through their splashy, often colorful ads, show they believe that The Boston Globe remains a quality newspaper that helps their sales.

This is an area through which organized, serious and "together" groups can impact on media policy in both hiring and coverage. I can assure you that the various big advertisers recognize the demographics and buying power of all consumers, rich and poor. For instance, Coca Cola and General Motors know all too well that they can't afford to offend Black buying dollars or allow them to switch to Pepsi or Ford. Last year, Rev. Jesse Jackson's Operation PUSH demonstrated this clearly when Coke decided to be MORE UNDERSTANDING and cooperative. No one even had to demonstrate in the streets. It was pretty direct. Blacks were going to make keener evaluations and be more selective in their drinking habits. After all, those people in the Pepsi ads seemed to prefer that product over Coke. Black folks were thinking of investigating the merits of Pepsi.

Probably the media's biggest source of economic support comes through ad agencies that coordinate the bulk of advertising linage with their clients. They are also the persons who design and create the copy these images portray.

With newspapers--take for example The Boston Globe--66 2/3% of the paper is advertising space and 33 1/3% is the newshole (the more advertising, the larger the newshole). How many times are ads so cleverly designed that you can hardly distinguish them from the news?

The Madison Avenue crowd, with its ability to channel advertising into both print and electronic media, has a far worse affirmative action record than either

newspapers or radio and television. You'll find very few Blacks in decision-making slots on Madison Avenue and few are visible even anywhere in the plush offices. So here, too, a serious and related "attack" should fall their way. Bear in mind that the copy created by the agencies many times keeps Blacks, Hispanics, Asians and other minorities INVISIBLE.

How interesting that this month, February, happens to be Black History Month. The establishment media will, in most places, present, to a vast multi-racial, multi-ethnic audience many positive stories about famous Blacks--Frederick Douglas, Benjamin Banneker, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. DuBois, Mary McLeod Bethune, Asa Philip Randolph, Dr. Charles Drew, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Paul Robeson, James Weldon Johnson, Jackie Robinson, Jesse Owens, Althea Gibson, Benjamin O. Davis, Richard Allen, Ralph Bunche, Martin Luther King, Jr., Crispus Attucks, Thurgood Marshall, George Washington Carver, Phyllis Wheatley, Marian Anderson and Malcolm X. These great Americans have made superb contributions to the entire society, not just Blacks. Yet, we have to have a special day, week, and now a month, to campaign for proper recognition of the leadership qualities and achievements of great Black Americans.

Today, 60 percent of the country's daily newspapers still do not employ a single minority journalist. Minorities are inadequately represented in newspaper management and on big city dailies. And, I'm sure that neither The Charleston Daily Mail nor The Charleston Gazette is blazing a spectacular trail in affirmative action.

Here we are now--some 16 years later, after the Kerner Commission branded the American press as "shockingly backward"--still with far too few publishers, editors and journalist educators committed to making the ink less "invisible." It shouldn't be necessary to have a Black History Month. Americans today should be about the business of working towards equality and implementing all facets of the Brown decision.

You know and I know that we have with us and among us people whose intellectual credentials are equal to those who run the media. For that matter, we have people equal to those who run the major educational institutions and there are not even ten Blacks running top colleges or universities in this nation today.

Now not all white folk are mean and biased. Many are "neutral." I don't know to whom to attribute this quote but I think it is right on target: "Once racism is installed, you don't need a racist to maintain it--neutrality will serve quite nicely."

As we celebrate the anniversary of the Brown decision and acknowledge that great progress has been made across the board, we must at the same time be aware that the present conservative agenda of President Ronald Reagan signals a new threat to the rights and ambitions of 30,000,000 Black Americans. West Virginia, notable for having the first highest unemployment rate in the country, hasn't improved either. President Reagan and his followers are trying hard to convince white Americans that Black advancement has now become self-sustaining and needs no further impetus or assistance.

After the Kerner Commission lambasted the media back in 1968, a distinguished Black journalist, Lerone Bennett, Jr. of Ebony magazine, commented: "It is impossible to speak of mass media in America without adding the specification of white or Black media. It is impossible to speak of general publications when they are edited for white or Black."

Bennett elaborated further: "This is a fundamental fact of life and of the communications in America--divided public and divided communities. If we confront the implications of the fact, we realize that white-oriented media cannot solve the race problems in America because white-oriented media are part of the race problem."

Bennett's point was superbly illustrated in the selections of the top ten stories of 1983 ranked by United Press International on one hand and The National Leader, the country's largest Black newspaper, on the other hand.

The UPI selections were: Beirut strife, including Marine barracks and U. S. embassy bombings; Soviets down KAL jet; U. S. invades Grenada; Soviets break off arms talks; U. S. Economy, deficits and recovery; Benigno Aquino killed in Manilla; AT&T breakup; Europe, U. S. nuclear protests; artificial heart trial ends and Barney Clark dies; and Lebanon, Israel sign pact.

The National Leader's list: Grenada invaded; Jesse Jackson enters the presidential race; the first Black astronaut; Black mayors elected; MLK holiday becomes law; the march on Washington; the NAACP dispute; Reagan's policies that hurt the poor; the coup in Nigeria; the first Black Miss America.

At this point, I want to just throw something out for your consideration. Contrary to the popular view that integration is the only way, that ideal in itself does not offer either the advantages or ultimate rewards for many organizations. Nor in cases is it practicable. I refer, of course, to the Black press, once a vital institution, which is now nearing the top of the endangered species list.

The Black press is surely at a crossroad, especially since so many of us have opted for the comfort afforded by working for "the man." We rationalize about the benefits that come from diluting the white environment and about impacting on white practices. But what about the Black press? Who will stand for it? Who will support it? Who will supply the brains and dynamics to keep it alive?

We know of the vigorous and unstinting efforts of Ebony, Jet, Essence and The National Leader, all quality publications that have long served as the line of communication among Black people in this country. The poor or declining health of these publications is indisputable testimony to the fact that institutional racism is alive, well and thriving in America.

The system promotes and frustrates the needs of the Black press. There is little in the way of viable circulation support, and an eroding advertising base

contributes to the dismal position of the Black press today. This attitude is also reflected in the plight of the traditional Black college. A viable Black press and academia are crucial to our struggle for survival.

If the media is to intelligently interpret our constantly changing society, publishers and editors must continue their "catch up" affirmative action programs by active recruiting and training. I do mean educating with tender, loving care and understanding so that minority journalist interns like yourselves can come aboard to help close so many of the gaps caused by insensitivity in news rooms and provide interpretive bridges to all segments of the community.

Look at the plight of the country today, and the entire world for that matter. Media is largely responsible for the communication negligence and abuse that deprive us of learning how to bring about a just society. Take for instance the abuse of power that was demonstrated by some of the leading newspapers and columnists who helped get Ambassador Andrew Young fired by President Jimmy Carter. "He talks too much," they said. "He should be more diplomatic. He's in bed with all the Blacks in Africa," and, "He always has to retract his controversial remarks or have them clarified."

I say that "cousin" Andy was right on the case. I think that he did tell the truth, and our State Department and nation really are not prepared for this kind of honest conduct. The ambassador, in my judgment, displayed keen intellect.

Also, wasn't it interesting to see that the "establishment" media planned no advance coverage of importance on Jesse Jackson's venture into Middle Eastern diplomacy during the Christmas holidays. Hardly any "big time" reporters or anchors were in Syria at the time. Far too much coverage was being given to Cabbage Patch dolls and "blue collar" football results.

Unprepared for the smashing success of Jesse's victory, an embarrassed media scrambled to catch up on its heretofore sloppy, haphazard, ho-hum coverage. Everyone

got in on the act. And even though, he intended it tongue in cheek as part of a spoof on the Democratic presidential race, columnist Russell Baker, writing in a recent New York Times article, acknowledged rightfully: "Jesse Jackson's successful venture into Middle Eastern diplomacy had shaken the foundations of American politics. Before Jackson, Presidential campaigning had consisted of making a national tour of motels while emitting a wide variety of sounds. After Jackson, talk and automatic checkout service could no longer assure victory."

Thanks to Jesse, we had another instance of a significant Black leader making a breakthrough in a foreign relations logjam. His exhibition of intelligence and skill helped get the two sides together to talk and negotiate. The State Department, like the media, doesn't have sufficient COLOR to deal adequately with the threat of potential peril around the world. And we, as a nation, have to bring about meaningful "catch-up" rights, so that all worthy citizens might contribute to our well-being.

Yep! Although I've knocked the press and despite all its flaws and arrogance, which it surely demonstrates at times, it is still the best tool we have for helping keep a democratic society honest. We all just have to keep campaigning and demanding that the media improve its methods of disseminating information to our citizens and that the media remain credible, responsible and fair. The free press in this country is crucial to all people who believe in a democratic society.